

THE ORDER OF BOOKS REVISITED

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The Order of Books was published in France in 1992 and translated into English in 1994. I have to confess that I had not reread it since, and perhaps I would have never read it again had I not been invited to do so for this exercise. The central aim of that book was to try to understand something of how in the period between the fourteenth and the eighteenth century the written word was classified, organized, and perceived by all the actors involved within the trajectory of the text, from authors to publishers and printers, from the printing shop to the library. I will begin by recounting some of the factors in my own intellectual life that I believe led up to that book, and go on to reflect on the arguments that I posited in 1992, in the hope of giving some account of the ways in which that earlier work might today be supplemented.

A PERSONAL PREHISTORY

The first works that I wrote in the late 1980s strengthened my conviction that one could not work as a historian without participating in a constant dialogue between the realms of scholarly enquiry and methodology. My early work was rooted in the highly influential paradigm associated with the so-called *Annales* School that then dominated the history of mentalities, a cultural history deeply concerned with statistical evidence. Looking back, two elements appear to have led me away from this earlier method. The first came out of observations relating to the various kinds of printed texts produced since the time of Gutenberg for the use of common readers or, in some instances, listeners: that literature sold by hawkers, initially in the cities and eventually throughout France from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, sometimes referred as the *Bibliothèque bleue*. Looking in detail at the history of these texts caused me to question a number of my earlier assumptions about the way in which texts behaved. Far from constituting a “popular literature” in the abstract, in accordance with assumptions about the transhistorical, anonymous, and unified nature of these texts “without merit,” I soon found that they had their own history, a history

that only a careful bibliographical and textual analysis could help to recover. As a result, I turned my attention to that corpus of texts which catered to ordinary French readers, rural as well as urban, and to considering the important role of those printer–booksellers who, at the end of the sixteenth century, in places like Lyon, Troyes, and Rouen, had effectively “invented” a new reading public.

This work led me to be the editor with Henri-Jean Martin, the founding father of the history of the book in France, of an important multi-volume project, namely the four volumes of the *Histoire de l'édition française*, which appeared between 1982 and 1986. This vast collective building site aimed to bring together the formerly separate worlds of history and librarianship, leading for the first time to a combined regard for the economic history of manuscript and print production, the social description of book-trade personnel (printers, booksellers, bookbinders, shopmen), the study of the objects and the texts that emanated from their workshops, and the then emerging preoccupation with readers and their practices. Innovative and original in their scope, these four volumes were republished between 1989 and 1991 and went on to inspire the multi-volume national histories of the book which are now in various stages of publication in, for example, England, Scotland, the United States, Canada, and Spain. One important consequence of the resulting global community of scholars was the breaking down of a number of disciplinary exclusivities which had long held sway, whether in the highly technical field of bibliography, in the quantitative history of book production and ownership, or in hermeneutic approaches that had been hitherto almost entirely unconcerned with the material forms which characterize historic texts.

Another important debt from this time I owe to the work of D. F. McKenzie, whose now well-known formulation “the sociology of texts” pointed to the possibility of a discipline concerned in the widest sense with “texts as recorded forms, and the processes of their transmission, including their production and reception.” By refusing to separate the analysis of symbolic meanings from that of the material forms by which they are transmitted, it became clear to me that such an approach offered a profound challenge to the longstanding division between the sciences of interpretation and those of description, in other words between hermeneutics and morphology.

My approach as a historian had for some time been concerned with the dynamics of representation, a preoccupation which was reinforced by a visit I made to Princeton in the spring of 1976, in consequence of which I began to realize something of the extent to which representations were not simple images that could be characterized as either true or false, but practices that had an inherent ability to shape perception and profoundly influence the social world. In many respects, it was this approach that formed the core of my work on *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution* (1990).

No approach to that historic event could have proceeded without an awareness of the devastating critique of Michel Foucault, whose work I took as the starting point for a series of historical enquiries, causing me to privilege three main Foucauldian concepts. First and foremost, the concept of “discipline,” related by Foucault to certain discursive practices; second, the idea of the “event” in the context of the historical relationship between Enlightenment and Revolution; finally, the idea of the author, or rather the “author function,” insofar as Foucault makes the distinction between how texts are attributed and the reality of their composition. It was these three issues that preoccupied me as I was writing *The Order of Books*.

THE PRINTING PRESS AS AN AGENT OF CHANGE OF SCRIBAL CULTURE

So what are the topics that a work like *The Order of Books* would have to address today, topics that were absent or marginal to my way of thinking in 1992? One of the most fundamental issues that would need to be reassessed is the relationship between scribal and print culture. Much important work has now been undertaken in this area: on its effects in England by scholars like Harold Love, Arthur Marotti, and H. R. Woudhuysen; on clandestine eighteenth-century manuscripts in France by François Moureau and Miguel Bénitez; and in Spain thanks to Fernando Bouza’s important study, *Corre manuscrito* (2001).

In the famous chapter of *Notre-Dame de Paris*, in which the impact of the printing press is described, Victor Hugo writes,

The archdeacon gazed at the gigantic edifice for some time in silence, then extending his right hand, with a sigh, towards the printed book which lay open on the table, and his left towards Notre-Dame, and turning a sad glance from the book to the church,—”Alas,” he said, “this will kill that.”

Over the last decade sufficient evidence has emerged to argue that “this”—the printing press—did not kill “that”—the manuscript. We now know that numerous kinds of texts—poetic anthologies, political tracts or libels, aristocratic books of conduct, newsletters, libertine and unorthodox texts, musical scores—all enjoyed wide circulation through the medium of manuscript. The reasons for such circulations were multiple, not only because, in general, scribal publication was cheaper than printing, but also because handwritten texts could elude censorship more easily than the printed word. In my most recent book, *Inscription and Erasure*, there is a chapter on Cyrano de Bergerac’s *Etats et Empires de la Lune*, which is typical of the kind of manuscript whose form of publication contrives to avoid censorship and to limit its circulation to a distinctive audience of readers who are able to understand its transgressive meaning. The manuscript book was

also sometimes favoured because it was more malleable, allowing more easily for additions and revisions. It is clear that any attempt to reflect on the order of books today would have to take into consideration the lively phenomenon of scribal publishing in the age of print.

We would also have to reflect on the way in which the coming of print engendered new uses for handwriting. Some book producers, we know, offered open spaces which served to invite the purchaser or user to supplement information provided by the printed text. As Bernard Capp has shown, many English almanacs included interleaved blank pages for this purpose. Other printed objects—official forms, for example—were produced in large quantities with a view to their completion in manuscript. Further evidence is provided by the case of the printed subject headings which often appeared in commonplace notebooks, awaiting the miscellaneous quotations that the owner would copy from texts that he or she had read. Another example can be found in books printed for university scholars, particularly classical texts, which often included wide spacing so that the student could write a commentary between lines. There are many other examples of printed items that were destined to engender and preserve writing by hand: for example marriage chanters which were used in some dioceses in the south of France or, as Ludovica Braida has shown in the case of notebooks in eighteenth-century Italy, the first daily planners which organized the day into various divisions—morning, afternoon, evening—waiting to be filled.

An approach to the devices that give order to written culture would also now have to take into account the intervention of readers in books in general. Such a concern can be seen not only in the established study of marginalia and handwritten annotations, but can also in the existence of manuscript errata. A further area for consideration is the composition of the book as a material object in instances where a specific owner has bound together manuscript and printed texts, or in extreme cases where handwritten references and commentaries are interspersed with cut and pasted fragments of printed books.

The recognition of all such phenomena serves to challenge the movement toward standardization that Elizabeth Eisenstein in *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (1979) strongly associated with the coming of print. In fact, evidence from print culture itself leads us to conclude that there are a range of practices which fundamentally challenge this idea: the stop-press corrections which multiply the possible combinations of corrected and uncorrected sheets in different copies of the same edition, the handwritten marginalia which distinguish the copies of the work and suggest appropriation by particular readers (here one thinks of extant copies of Copernicus's *De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium* or Jean Bodin's *De Natura Universalis Theatrum*, all of the surviving copies of which have been studied by Owen Gingerich and Ann Blair), or the kind of hybrid objects that I have already identified, constructed by their owners from

manuscript and printed texts. An awareness of these aberrant forms allows us to move beyond conventional assumptions about the fixity of print and the fluidity of manuscript. While a perspective based on standardization may not be entirely unjustified, two serious caveats must be recognized: first, that the capacity of print for the production of identical copies was not always evident in practice; and second, that for certain texts the fixity of copying by hand, as Harold Love has argued, could sometimes be remarkable. In the end, we accept at our peril a too-simple distinction between the permanence of print versus the instability of handwriting. This is a question that was not, I think, sufficiently addressed in *The Order of Books*.

WORKS, AUTHORSHIP, AND LITERATURE

Another question that I would raise if I were approaching the order of books today is the relationship between the book as object and the book as text. It is in this regard that we really can begin to think of the revolutionary impact of Gutenberg's invention, rather than in terms of a standardization which may or may not be linked explicitly to the printing press. Indeed, it is the association between the two senses of what a book means—on the one hand a written text, and on the other an object quite different from other objects in written culture—that was profoundly transformed by the mechanical reproduction of text. This is most obviously seen in the way in which what Genette calls the “paratext,” and more particularly the “peritext”—that is to say, the various thresholds by which the reader enters into the text—acquired a specific kind of visibility. Thus did preliminaries take on the form of gatherings that could immediately be identified by a specific series of signatures—italics, letters with tildes, stars, and so on—appearing before, but generally printed after, the main body of the book. The architectural language of the porch, the vestibule, the threshold leading from the peritext to the text itself, cannot be separated from those technical aspects which typographically differentiate the preliminaries from the work itself.

The preliminaries of a work can provide a helpful way to understanding the “order of books” in other ways. In many contemporary editions, only the preliminaries that were supposedly written by the text's author were considered, while all others tended to be overlooked (this is particularly true of Spanish books of the Golden Age, the *aprobaciones*, *privilegio*, *fe de errata* or *tasa*). But, as can be seen from the preliminaries of the three *Don Quixotes* of 1605, 1614 (the apocryphal continuation), and 1615, the interrelations between different regimes of paratextual material (legal and juridical, editorial, economic, as well as literary) could also serve to produce other multiple meanings.

A related aspect of the same question has arisen in recent years, notably in the work of Armando Petrucci in his approach to what he calls the *libro unitario*, or

the unitary book, namely those books which contain the text or texts of a single author. The medieval manuscript tradition was largely based, at least in the vernacular, on the miscellany. From the eighth century on, this was the dominant form of the book, exceptions being found in the case of juridical codices, the works of the Fathers of the Church, and some of the classics of antiquity. Yet this is not to suggest that the *libro unitario* was born with the printing press. Since the mid-fourteenth century, readers and owners of vernacular texts can be seen to have broken with the tradition of the miscellany, instead binding up a single work, or works, by the same author—in Italy Boccaccio and Petrarch, in France Christine de Pisan and Charles d’Orléans. Nevertheless it is clear that the printing press served to increase this practice, leading, in seventeenth-century England, to the appearance of a series of *Workes*, which began not with the 1616 Ben Jonson Folio, or the 1623 Shakespeare Folio, but with Gascoigne and Samuel Daniel, both of whose works were produced in folio.

In relation to the authorship chapter of *The Order of Books*, two additional recent debates should be mentioned. First, the debate that was launched by a conference at Harvard organized by Mario Biagioli and Peter Galison on the theme “What is a scientific author?”. On that occasion, the question came back to Foucault’s seminal lecture in which he opposed the *auctoritas* of “scientific” works—linked in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance with the author’s name—and the anonymous circulation of “literary” texts with no attribution to a proper name. Today we would want to challenge such a dichotomy on a number of grounds. In the case of the scientific author one would want to recognize the distinction between the author in the modern sense who can lay claim to a specific experiment or discovery and the “author” in the sense of the authority giving credibility to an invention, in the seventeenth century for instance the aristocratic eyewitnesses of experiments, by whose testimony the latter are legitimated.

Another related debate is the one that has focused on co-authorship and collaborative writing as it occurred particularly in the case of drama in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, an issue that was highlighted by Jeffrey Knapp in a 2005 issue of the journal *Representations*. In that article, Knapp attempts to challenge—though it seems to me not entirely convincingly—the dogma that English drama from 1560 to 1640 was a largely collaborative practice. This latter view was developed at some length by Jeffrey Masten and Stephen Orgel, who stressed that the title pages of printed plays tended to mask the then dominant practice of collaborative composition. The discrepancy between the collaborative practice of writing and the protocols of play-printing is clearly evident, for example, in Henslowe’s diary in which it is clear that for the period from 1590 to 1609 two-thirds of the plays are attributed to at least two and often more authors, whereas for the same period the collaboration explicitly recognized on the title pages of printed editions is never more than eighteen per

cent. Such a discrepancy reminds us of the Foucauldian distinction between who is writing a text and to whom this same text is attributed. In such instances we can observe a complete discrepancy between the actual practice of composition and the reduction of collaboration to one proper name, only one, or in some instances to no name at all.

There are other ways, too, in which we might want to reflect on the impact of print, not least its contribution to the invention of the concept of literature. It is with the coming of print that we begin to see published compendia of national literature – take the case of Charles Sorel’s *Bibliothèque Française* in 1664 or Nicolás Antonio’s *Biblioteca Hispana* in the 1670s, both of which list authors and works insofar as they are defined as part of the national patrimony or repertory for “literature” *avant la lettre*. Interesting also is the way in which the “national” is defined apart from its political implications, evident in the way in which Sorel introduced Cervantes into a *Bibliothèque française* because his works had become “naturalized” through translation, in much the same way that he also includes the picaresque novel in the French tradition. Antonio considered as Spanish all those authors who lived in a territory that is or was under Spanish domination (Portugal, for example between 1580 and 1640) or all the authors who wrote in Castilian, whatever their nationality. David Scott Kastan proposes a parallel situation in the formation of a national English literature, basing his argument on the activities of the stationer Humphrey Moseley who published two series of plays and poems in the same format – quarto for the plays, octavo for the poems – , with the same title-page layout and including portraits of the author. Such an editorial project can be seen to have defined a “literary” corpus which distinguished it from other genres (travelogues, histories, etc.) and a “national” one in the sense that all of the poets and playwrights included on Moseley’s list are English writers who flourished during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

This leads to another issue which was not addressed in *The Order of Books*, namely the analysis of authorial biography. When, we might want to ask, did the genre first appear and how did it change over time? Shakespeare is an important case in point, from the anecdotes compiled by Rowe in his 1709 edition to Malone’s life of Shakespeare. Cervantes, too, provides a suggestive example—his first biography, written by Mayans y Siscar, was published in the 1737 London edition of *Don Quijote*—as does Molière, whose first biography appeared in 1725, written by Grimarest. When examined in the light of the chronological publication of the works (as in the case of Malone), these biographical writings were crucial for establishing the twofold relation between the life and the work: the life as inspiring the work, or, conversely, the work as document of the life. Until approaches such as Stephen Greenblatt’s in *Will in the World* (2004), literary history could still be regarded as the heir of this very interrelationship, a consequence of the relationship between the writing of biographies and the editorial practices that

attempted to track not the order of publication, but the order in which an author's works were composed. A similar point has recently been made with reference to a later period by William St Clair, whose account of *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (2004) seeks, among other things, to counter assumptions about the relationship between the chronological appearance of literary works and the mentalities of their time with no regard for the antiquated texts that were actually being read in the early nineteenth century.

HISTORY OF PRINT CULTURE OR CULTURAL HISTORY OF PRINT?

More generally, if I were writing *The Order of Books* today I would have to confront head on the debate surrounding two models that have been proposed for understanding the "printing revolution". On the one hand stands the conventional model, often attributed to the work of Elizabeth Eisenstein, and based on the idea that printing presses, printing shops, books, and the different kinds of printed item are to be understood primarily or even exclusively as agents of dissemination. Translations, anthologies, collected works, even popular genres (broadside ballads and chapbooks, *occasionnels* and *Bibliothèque bleue*, *pliegos sueltos* and *literatura de cordel*), all could sustain this dissemination model because all were powerful instruments for the acculturation of the West to the written word. But of course there is now an alternative model, a constructivist one best exemplified in the work of Adrian Johns, which regards the printing press, like any other technological invention, as having no intrinsic meaning. Its properties and effects, so the argument goes, can instead be seen to have been contradictorily constructed through exchanges, negotiations and a variety of conventions. Based on the new history of science, and particularly the history of experimental science, this alternative point of view is located in a form of discourse which presupposes the existence of a set of conventions and negotiations for establishing the conditions under which experiments are replicated and proof authenticated. In the same manner, it is argued, norms and codes had to be established for giving credit to publishers for the production of different editions, and ultimately for the way in which knowledge was transmitted through texts.

This alternative perspective may in the end lead to a reappraisal of the "black legend" of the printing press. Long held in the thrall of a hagiographic discourse that constructs the invention of the printing press as one of the major discoveries of modern times, we have sometimes lost sight of a counterdiscourse that repeatedly denounced the ability of print to introduce corruption. When Don Quixote visits a printing shop in Barcelona in the second part of the novel, he castigates printers and booksellers for their trickery and dishonesty. When Lope de Vega imagines a dialogue in his *comedia Fuente Ovejuna* between a peasant and a scholar, the latter declares that, far from producing new works of genius,

the invention of print merely multiplied the number of unnecessary books. And when Quevedo speculates in the *Sueño del infierno* (The Dream of Hell) why booksellers and printers are sentenced to damnation, it is, he supposes, in return for making available to readers unable to understand them texts whose circulation ought to have been restricted to the literati. In the terms of this counterdiscourse, we can see that the printing press introduces not only moral corruption, but also several other kinds. For one thing, the press multiplies the kinds of textual corruption that are caused by clumsy compositors and correctors, there is also the corruption that comes through the commercialization of the book trade, and finally there is the corruption of meaning that stems from the tendency of ignorant readers towards misunderstanding. In the end, such denunciations may go some way towards explaining the lengths to which booksellers and printers went to propagandize their own social worth in the age of print.

READING AND THE LIMITS OF POACHING

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to clarify some misunderstandings about what I wrote in *The Order of Books* on the practice of reading. A number of subsequent critiques have attempted to challenge the idea of the freedom of reading—an idea, supposedly mine, that reading is a practice characterized by the unlimited creative capacity of the reader. In opposition to this idea some have identified those codes and strategies that constrain and limit the creation of new meanings. It was certainly not my intention in 1992 to affirm that the act of reading was entirely free and without boundaries. In our own time, the question is of course rooted in Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), and particularly in the famous chapter on reading as poaching. De Certeau was not particularly interested in historical or sociological perspectives, and in that work desired to position himself against traditional assumptions about the alienation supposedly produced by mass media, the capacity of every reader to poach on the territory of the other, to construct for himself or herself a meaning different from the meaning intended by the text. Such a capacity for appropriation was proposed by de Certeau as one of the universal and essential characteristics of reading. By citing and using this form of analysis, my intention was, at the time, to remove the reader from the text and to assert, in opposition to strictly semiotic, structuralist, or linguistic models and approaches, that meaning is not created only by textual machinery, but rather in the relationship *between* this machinery and the capacity, ability, interests, and practices of the reader.

In regard to what is called the phenomenology of reading, to be found most obviously in works like Wolfgang Iser's *The Act of Reading* (1978), I wanted also to historicize and sociologize, so to speak, categories like Stanley Fish's "interpretative community", or the concept of "appropriation", which I borrowed

both from Foucault (in the sense that to appropriate something is to forbid the other to appropriate it) and from phenomenology and hermeneutics (for which appropriation is a creative process, involving the production of new meaning for the text appropriated). These two notions, interpretative community and appropriation, were at the core of my analysis, but with the proviso that both had to be historicized and located within the set of conventions, norms, interests, and practices that characterized different ways of reading, different relations with the written culture, and the different perceptions and representations of the social world that were shared by individuals who have similar trajectories and common experiences.

Far from dissolving the meaning of texts or genres into a myriad of universal responses devoid of any organizing principle, such a perspective sought to locate literary preferences and reading gestures within the very codes and conventions that are imposed by social identity. It also represented an attempt to inscribe the construction of meaning within the constraints which derive from both the textual and the material forms of the written word, whatever they may be, and which are appropriated by readers or imposed on them. It was on the identification of interpretative communities, endowed with sociohistorical meaning, that my approach to the history of reading was based. In doing so, it concerned itself with a triangular relationship (principally a theoretical one because, of course, in social practice these elements work together) involving semantic content, material forms of inscription—whether epigraphic, manuscript, printed, or oral—and readerly appropriation, with readers always understood as members of specific interpretative communities.

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These, then, are some of the aspects of my approach in *The Order of Books* that require reconsideration fifteen years on, perhaps even more so because of the amount of important new work that has gone on in the history of the book since the early 1990s. As I suggested in my introduction, one of the principal achievements of the field, as it is broadly conceived here, and as I began to understand it as I wrote *The Order of Books*, is its ability to connect different intellectual traditions which had previously developed in relative isolation, not least the sociology of the texts and literary criticism, the history of the book and the history of writing, even historical bibliography and cultural history, insofar as the latter, at least in my own instance, was framed and practised as a legacy of the *Annales* school. Looking back, I think that for me the first important step in the process towards the association of the materiality of texts and the textuality of written objects was *l'Histoire de l'édition française*, which at the same time issued a fundamental challenge to the traditional distinction between the history

of mentalities and the history of ideas. In my most recent work, *Inscription and Erasure* (2007), I have attempted to bring together what the Western tradition has long kept apart: on the one hand, interpretation of and commentary on works of literature, and on the other, the analysis of the technical and social conditions of their publication, circulation, and appropriation. On reflection, it seems that my own thinking continues to be governed by the same imperatives that informed my work in the 1980s, namely a belief that only through the encouragement of multiple encounters between disciplines, traditions, and approaches can *histoire du livre* be strengthened as an intellectual paradigm.